

Investigative Strike Teams

Journalists get mad at bloggers: “Without real reporting, they’d have nothing to comment on!” Bloggers get mad at journalists: “There’s a reason nobody reads newspapers anymore. They’re dry and dull and wrong.” But the gap is shrinking: bloggers are doing more real reporting, journalists are getting more humanized (with all the digressions, opinions, and biases that entails).

So what if you paired an investigative reporter with a blogger? Reporters didn’t used to write their own stories. (Why would a good investigator be a good writer?) The reporter would be out in the field, knocking on doors and taking notes, which they’d hand to a writer at a desk, who would turn them into a coherent, vivid story. (*Newsweek* still operates this way.)

Replace the writer with a blogger. They’d post the story as it unfolded, capturing the excitement of discovery: the big breaks, the wrong turns, the moment when it all comes together. Like any talented blogger, they’d keep people coming back: *What happens next? I want to know more!* They’d keep up a conversation with readers and other bloggers, sharing new leads with the reporter. It’d be a powerful duo.

But blogging isn’t everything. You also want to recap the story so far: for those just tuning in, here are the characters, here’s what’s happened, here’s why it’s important. Keep a summary article alongside the blog and update it in tandem. It would lay out the whole story in one place, with links to particular posts or source documents for more information. That way everyone can always get an overview of the bigger picture — including the reporters.

You’ll also want a tech person around to help out. Many stories involve databases; you need someone to work with the reporter to parse and process the data, then work with the blogger to put the results online. And there are plenty of other times where a small program or some tech knowledge comes in handy.

And you’ll need a lawyer on staff. Getting information isn’t easy. You’ll need someone who can file FOIA lawsuits and respond to legal threats. Maybe you can even file lawsuits against corporate malefactors and obtain documents in discovery. Then work with *pro bono* lawyers or public interest law firms to win the lawsuit in its own right.

Lawsuits are needed because modern investigations can’t stop at publication. If there was an era when a front page *Times* story could stop a scandal, that era is over. Ending abuses requires action. This makes traditional journalists uncomfortable. They see their job as reporting the facts, not changing them.

We may always need the detached journalist interested only in The Truth, but there’s room for more. Just as journalism needs to become more humanized, it needs to become more activist. Journalists uncover outrageous things, which gets people outraged, but they seem to think channeling that outrage into something productive is someone else’s responsibility.

Instead, a good investigative team needs a political organizer. They can build an email list of people who get outraged by their reporting and use it, along with blogs and the lists of other political groups, to put pressure on the bad guys, fundraise for further journalism, and collect a team of volunteers. The volunteers can help with aspects of the reporting — a modern investigation can get much further by crowdsourcing certain tricky aspects and depending on talented volunteers for particular tasks. A good political organizer knows how to get and manage volunteers.

But to make your organizing maximally effective, you’ll need (gasp!) a lobbyist. They’ll meet with representatives to encourage them to hold hearings based on stories you’re working on, where they can subpoena documents and testimony. They’ll ask representatives to introduce bills to address the abuses you’ve uncovered and work with them on legislative strategy to get those bills passed. And they’ll team up with the political organizer to get constituents writing to their representatives in favor of these bills.

The only way to get good at something is deliberate practice: trying various things and seeing how they work. But when it comes to making change, that’s very hard to do. Change requires so many people and takes so long that it’s almost impossible to say for sure that your doing X helped accomplish Y. Which means that it becomes very easy to fool yourself into thinking you’re more effective than you are.

But if you have one team — some reporters, a blogger/writer, a techie, a lawyer, an organizer, and a lobbyist — together, they form an investigative strike team: uncovering corruption, exposing it, and effecting change. They can watch the whole process unfold from a reporter’s suspicion to a writer’s story to a legislative fix. And they can get better at it. It’d be a powerful combination. That’s the kind of future-of-news that I want to see.

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